

ICMAP Pathway Exam (IPE)

December 2020 Examiner's report

General comments

In this report, the examining team share observations from the marking process, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of candidates who attempted the questions in the December 2020 ICMAP Pathway Exam. Unsuccessful candidates can use this examiner's report as part of their preparation towards future exam attempts, alongside attempting question practice from the specimen questions provided.

Format of the exam

The examination consisted of a 4-hour exam with a single compulsory section comprising of two questions, each consisting of a variety of main tasks. Question 1 consisted of a 50 mark case study focused on Advanced Business Consultancy (ABC), a listed consultancy company. The candidate's role was a finance manager working in ABC's finance department. Question 2 consisted of a 50 mark case study focused on The Biscuit Company (TBC), a food manufacturer. The candidate's role was an external consultant hired by TBC to provide strategic advice and guidance on a number of matters under consideration by the TBC board.

The marking scheme included 78 Technical marks for the correct use and application of technical knowledge. For every element of technical content, answers needed to be applied to the case; repetition of rote learned knowledge attracted minimal marks.

In addition, the marking scheme included 22 marks for Professional skills and competencies. The skill being examined in the requirement should have been evident in how candidates answered the task, although candidates may have drawn on other skills as well when answering. When awarding Professional skills marks, the marker looked primarily at the professional skill being tested in the task requirement, but also looked at the general professionalism that candidates demonstrated (which includes consideration of logical, well presented answers, which avoid unnecessary repetition and answer the question set). The marker also looked for answers to be presented in an appropriate tone for the recipient.

Exam Performance

Overall, the standard of candidates' answers was variable, with many candidates demonstrating a weak exam technique, which saw answers which were poorly structured or which focused on knowledge and lacked application to the facts of the scenarios. Knowledge is essentially taken for granted at this level; the essence of the IPE is the application of this knowledge to the practical scenarios and it is the demonstration of these skills which make for a successful response on this examination.

Although candidates did not appear to struggle to answer the required tasks within the allotted time, the tasks where candidates performed best tended to be in areas where they could demonstrate their knowledge and expertise, rather than where they needed more detailed syllabus knowledge.

Weaker candidates in particular would have benefitted from spending more time on the practice questions provided in the learning materials, particularly attempting these under exam conditions. The advice on question practice and undertaking tuition from a learning partner does not seem to have been taken up by many candidates. The examining team would strongly advise that candidates use these resources to ensure that they have the right overall attitude to IPE, which is intended to lie at a post-graduate level.

In addition, although all candidates had completed ACCA's Ethics and Professional Skills module (EPSM) by the examination date, some candidates only completed it late in their preparation, which the examining team feel was evident in the answers given. The advice remains that candidates for the IPE should complete EPSM early in their preparation, to then be able to use and develop the skills gained throughout the more detailed and question-based phase of their revision.

Stronger candidates integrated and used information from the case study materials throughout their answers, selecting relevant technical knowledge to support the applied points they were making. They demonstrated professional skills through analysis, evaluation and sound commercial awareness, and through how they structured and presented their answers.

Areas answered well

Question 1b) required candidates to discuss and recommend suitable leadership traits for a new Finance Director, to aid in the company's recruitment process. Most candidates scored fairly well on this task, perhaps as it did not require a detailed knowledge of the ACCA syllabus. Stronger candidates went beyond simply listing the traits and explained them by linking them to the scenario.

Question 1c)i) asked candidates to explain the concept of cryptocurrency and recommend whether ABC should accept a particular cryptocurrency as a payment method. Answers for this task were generally good, despite it being quite a specialized area. Stronger candidates used the exhibit to link together the opportunity of using cryptocurrency with the current situation of the company in the case study.

Areas answered poorly

Feedback from the marking process summarised four reasons for candidates scoring poorly on some requirements:

1. A lack of knowledge of key terms used within requirements (e.g. principles-based governance, balanced scorecard, joint venture). Weaker students did not demonstrate a good understanding of these concepts.
2. Limited application to the scenario. Weaker students produced generic answers with very limited reference to the companies and the scenario.
3. Failing to answer the requirement. Weaker students did not stick to the requirement and instead tried to produce their own answer structure based on their own level of knowledge.
4. Weak approach to answering professional level exam questions. It sometimes appeared that students were trying their best to answer questions, in terms of style and structure, but were not following a structured, methodical approach to attempting professional exam questions - this would imply limited exam question practice.

In particular the following requirements are highlighted as having been poorly answered:

Question 1c)ii) required candidates to advise on how a cryptocurrency should be accounted for in ABC's financial statements. The question provided a clear structure for candidates to use, listing five possible accounting definitions to be considered. Many candidates took a simplistic approach of discussing a single option (e.g. intangible asset), without analysing and discounting a range of options by using the information in the exhibit. This suggested a lack of good exam technique rather than a lack of knowledge.

Question 2d) required candidates to prepare two slides with accompanying notes on the features and challenges around Big Data. Although this should have been a straightforward requirement where candidates could score a good number of the available marks for basic knowledge, candidates performed poorly. This appears to have been due to a lack of preparation, both on the topic being tested and the use of slides.